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## How slow is slow?

*Review of Speed – Papers and Exhibition.*

*Exhibited at Internationale Handwerksmesse, Munich. March 3-9, 2010.*

*Presented by ThinkTank – A European Initiative for the Applied Arts*

The title of this review is a curious, mundane question, but creates a variety of ponderances. How slow is slow? What exactly, is slowness? Slow is a relational quality, since it can only be understood in contrast to something that is fast. Both of these qualities are better understood through the phenomenon of speed.

In physics, speed is akin to velocity, and according to Wikipedia, is defined as the rate of change of position. The formulaic representation is annotated as:

$$\bar{\mathbf{v}} = \frac{\Delta \mathbf{x}}{\Delta t}.$$

Simply put, velocity is determined by a change in distance over time. To affect any change in position is to do one of two things: change the amount of time required, or change the amount of distance covered.

To move slow then, is to either increase time spent, or decrease distance travelled. In most cases, moving slow is associated with the former aspect, increased time.

This past March, a compendium of papers and an exhibition of exemplar work was presented by ThinkTank, a collective of thinkers and writers from across Europe who annually tackle conceptual problems related to the Applied Arts. This year's topic, presented in Munich at the Internationale Handwerksmesse from March 3-9 was *Speed*. The tone of the publication, a compendium of short papers, investigated the relationship between speed and slowness, and their relationship to the crafts and applied arts.

What emerges from the publication is not a blind enthusiasm for the adoption of the slow movement in the crafts, but a critical inquiry as to why the craft sector seems to be adopting this position, and whether or not it is of value to the advancement of the disciplines in a culture infatuated with speed and change. Love Jönsson (Sweden) expresses it directly: "...the current interest in craft as an antidote to the fast-paced society...can be questioned from a variety of perspectives." (pg 15). He continues: "...the notion of craft as a resistance movement against the speed that keeps modern society going not only constricts our understanding of craft; it has also failed to secure a place for craft in the mainstream culture..."(pg15). Jönsson admits he is not opposed to the traditions of craft that embrace slow, and resist change, but is concerned that such a narrow definition of craft embracing the slow movement prevents the advancement and innovation of the field in a society embracing change. In terms of velocity, Jönsson is advocating the notion that craft,

to not marginalize itself yet further, needs to understand the relationship between time and distance, in this regard, the change in conceptual distance covered that marks speed in contemporary material culture.

Liesbeth den Besten (Netherlands) introduces a secondary notion that slowness can contradict if embraced too firmly, namely that of spontaneity. den Besten states: "In many reviews of craft exhibitions, an emphasis is put on craft's slowness; it is to be appreciated as a special value, as a compensation for today's fast and cheap society...there are craftspeople who can work spontaneously with their materials. Spontaneity involves directness and velocity." (pg 16). As described by den Besten, this spontaneity involves a certain amount of risk: risk of intention and risk of execution. A spontaneous act throws caution to the wind in the hope that something magical will appear. Glenn Adamson (UK), tries to resolve these elements of risk by elucidating that perhaps there is a finer balance found in craft practice: "...it is not that craft is simply slow; it is that at every step of the way, attention and execution – the speed of intentional decision-making and the speed of action – are exactly matched to one another." (pg 45). In this way, Adamson highlights a theme that can be uncovered within the collection of papers presented, that of the dynamicism of craft practice.

Craft is dynamic precisely because it defies a clear definition. Craft is dynamic because it is engaged in a dance between making and thinking. The maker responds to the material, the process, the conceptual framework and is in constant dialogue with the work as it develops. It requires an understanding of when to go slow, and when to go fast. It requires an awareness of what is happening in front of the maker's hands, and demands a level of skill to know the appropriate response. In a sense, then, the call to align craft to a slow movement potentially stifles this dynamicism. The desire for a reduction of velocity, of a reduction of speed, imposes upon the field of craft a rate of change that is not only dependent upon an increase in time, but conversely, also imposes a reduction of distance covered, a restriction to alignment, or unwillingness to participate in massive change that is contemporary culture. This, according to many of the authors in *Speed*, could also have a negative effect upon the discipline, and further marginalize it.

The contributing authors in *Speed* are aware that words alone will not suffice to convey their arguments, and the relationship between the publication and the exhibition serves to highlight their arguments by presenting 'case studies' of work from internationally acclaimed designers, makers and artists. den Besten holds up the work of Ted Noten (Netherlands), a conceptual jeweler whose aim is to ensure that every woman on the planet is able to possess an original Ted Noten ring. Though a lofty ideal, is it necessarily the anti-thesis to a craft practice? Without the aid of contemporary production processes, Noten's *Miss Piggy* rings would not be producible on the scale or at the speed that Noten intends.

Gabi Dewald introduces the work of Birgit Saupe (Germany), reinforcing den Besten's discussion of spontaneity and speed. The untitled object appears to be rather crude in production, throwing all technical understanding to the wind to

create something that is not in line with the tradition of porcelain figure. Yet there is an undeniable quality of life within the artefact that comes from the hastiness of its fabrication. It is raw and energetic, and despite its technical shortcomings, it evokes emotion and references a practice well established within the tradition of ceramics. Had more time been spent, editing, perfecting, allowing the materials to develop accordingly, would some of this life been lost? What would the addition of time, of working slowly, have added to this piece, or detracted from it? Adamson's point regarding balance between attention and execution finds an appropriate place in Saupe's work, though it prefers to raise the question of where the balance is to be struck, rather than being an exemplar of what the balance is. And perhaps here is the point of the *Speed* exhibition. Advocating a firm position of slowness and the slow movement, craft practitioners risk establishing a best fit, a perfect slowness, when ideally, counterpoints that discuss speed, either super slow, or super fast, require us to develop our own understanding of the pace at which we live. Not always slow, and certainly, too often too fast, craft practice and its dynamic have an opportunity to help us reflect on the pace of life, rather than advocating for one position over another.

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